



**Private Club  
Performance Management**

# **The Power of Employee Empowerment**



**Ed Rehkopf**

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## ***INTRODUCTION***

Employee empowerment became a corporate buzzword in the Nineties and the consensus in the business press was that it was a good thing. Many companies claimed to empower their employees but claiming to do so and doing it are two very different matters.

Instead of the traditional view that employees are easily replaceable elements in an organization, people who must be trained to do narrow, well-defined tasks and who must be closely watched and supervised at all times, the concept of empowerment says that today's more educated and sometimes more sophisticated employees need and want to contribute more to their employer and workplace. Yet many businesses marginalize their employees by refusing to listen to them and by failing to let them contribute to the enterprise in any meaningful way.

A few companies have truly embraced the concept of empowerment and have discovered the immense power and synergy that can be unleashed when employees participate more fully in their operations. Any employee at a Ritz-Carlton hotel can spend up to \$2,000 a day per guest to solve problems and not just satisfy their guests, but to wow them with "legendary" service.

Further, highly successful companies who engage their employees in developing work processes and continual process improvement have discovered that these empowered employees make indispensable partners in delivering service. Not only do they have a greater stake in the enterprise and are more fully committed to and responsible for their work, they equate their purpose and success with that of their company.

Motivation and morale in such companies is sky-high without gimmicks or periodic campaigns by management. These employees are energized by their involvement and sense of contribution. Again, we point to the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, whose employees are passionate about their service to guests and fellow employees and whose loyalty to their employer is as legendary as their service.

Yet it takes more than telling employees they can spend money to solve problems to reap the benefits of employee empowerment. Establishing a culture of empowerment requires the necessary leadership and culture to nourish and sustain it.

Managers must also be secure enough in their positions and knowledge to be open to employee ideas, while employees must understand the framework and guidelines of their empowerment. Within defined limits, employees must be free to use their creativity and ingenuity to improvise and solve service problems – the extent of which management can never fully anticipate nor create enough contingency instructions.

**"Without empowerment,  
an organization will never  
be a service leader.  
Empowerment is the most  
critical skill an employee  
can master and a company  
can drive in order to lure  
and keep customers."**

*John Tschohl*



### **What is Employee Empowerment?**

So, what are empowered employees and how can they help your hospitality organization meet its Mission and Vision? In the simplest terms empowered employees are viewed as full-fledged partners in your quest for high levels of quality and service. They are encouraged to think, act, and make decisions on their own based on guidelines defined by the organization.

The major role that a business makes in empowering its employees is to create a culture where employees are valued and recognized as indispensable partners in the enterprise. It must also understand that to be successful with employee empowerment, employees must **fully sense** the organization's commitment to such empowerment; simply saying that employees are empowered, does not make it so. The organization's leaders at all levels must do more than talk the talk.

Leaders must understand that empowerment is not something bestowed on employees like some magical gift given by management to the workers. The leaders' role is to establish both the environment and atmosphere where employees feel their empowerment and are emboldened to make decisions, knowing they have the support and backing of their leaders. While the leaders must clearly lay out for employees the extent of their authority to act and make decisions, the **sense of empowerment** comes from the employees.

While employee empowerment may be a desirable practice by management, it ultimately can come about **only with the recognition by employees** that they are empowered. This means that the focus of leaders must not be on what employees are doing to achieve empowerment, but on what they themselves are doing to promote and enable it.

*Note: I have used an article by Susan M. Heathfield, a management consultant, entitled Top 10 Principles of Employee Empowerment, as the basic outline for this handbook; and quoted from her article at the beginning of each section.*



## *I – VALUE YOUR PEOPLE*

*“Your regard for people shines through in all of your actions and words. Your facial expression, your body language, and your words express what you are thinking about the people who report to you. Your goal is to demonstrate your appreciation for each person's unique value. No matter how an employee is performing on their current task, your value for the employee as a human being should never falter and always be visible.”*

*Susan M. Heathfield*

### **Guidance to Leaders**

Hospitality organizations need to ensure that their people are valued by stressing empowerment in their Organizational Values and Culture. Additional guidance can be found in the concept of Service-based Leadership as discussed in *Leadership on the Line, a Guide for Front Line Supervisors, Business Owners, and Emerging Leaders*.

*“We acknowledge each operation as a team of dedicated individuals working toward common goals and we recognize the ultimate value of people in everything we do.”*

*Operating Standards*

*“While I may direct employees’ work, their productive effort and well-being serve the interests of the organization who employs them. Therefore, I must work hard to ensure their maximum contribution to the mission and goals of the organization. I can only do this if I value each employee as an individual whose contribution to the collective effort is directly dependent upon my leadership, as well as the tools, training, resources, and support I provide them.”*

*Managers’ Code of Ethics*

*“All employees will be treated with dignity and respect.”*

*Principles of Employee Relations*

*“As a group of people committed to common goals, you can only achieve your team’s greatest potential by taking advantage of the talent, initiative, and ingenuity of each one of your employees. To the extent that any individual is not valued, trained, and motivated, your enterprise suffers.”*

*Leadership on the Line, p. 50*

*“People matter! And true leaders understand this.*

*Leadership on the Line, p. 171*

### **Valuing Your People**

What things can a leader do to demonstrate your regard for people “in all your actions and words”?

1. **Know and use their names.** Everyone likes to be recognized as an individual and be called by name. Certainly, your members do, and your employees do as well. Introduce them to members, guests, and visitors, when appropriate. Failing to do so implies they’re just part of the scenery instead of key contributors to the success of your organization.



2. **Learn about them as individuals.** Get to know them, their life situation, their dreams and plans, their goals in life. This does not mean you are to become their friends, but it does mean you have enough interest in them as individuals to try to understand their situation, their needs, and motivations.
3. **Greet them daily.** You should never fail to greet employees when you see them each day. You don't like to be ignored as if you were unimportant, and neither do they.
4. **Share your time with them.** As busy as you are, make time for your employees. They have questions, concerns, and needs that should never be ignored. Be open and approachable. When you are not, when they are afraid to come to you for fear of your reaction, you are kept in the dark about what is really going on in your team. If any employee is monopolizing your time or is a "high maintenance" employee, do not be shy about letting him know the inappropriateness of his behavior.
5. **Recognize each as an individual.** None of us is the perfect employee, manager, server, desk clerk, cart attendant, etc. Don't expect your employees to be. Learn each person's strengths and weakness. Capitalize on the strengths and help each person overcome their weaknesses. The time you invest in helping an employee develop his or her skills and abilities is well worth the effort and will be appreciated far more than you'll ever realize.
6. **Be involved in the workplace and work processes.** Do not create a hostile work environment by failing to adequately communicate with your employees. Without your ongoing guidance and direction, petty dissensions and friction will grow among the workers of your team as they struggle to figure out what they must do and who must do what.
7. **Look out for their welfare.** Make sure your employees get adequate work breaks, that their workspaces are set up for comfort and efficiency, that they are properly trained and equipped for their jobs, that you adjust work schedules when possible to meet individual needs, that you resolve pay discrepancies quickly, that you get back to them to resolve issues they've raised. Make sure they understand their benefits, taking the time to explain the details to them. Encourage them to participate in the organization's retirement plan, showing how even small contributions can build up over time.
8. **Treat them as adults.** When you treat employees like children, they will act like children. Don't talk down to them or treat them like they're stupid. When you give people responsibility, most will reward your trust. Those who demonstrate they can't be trusted should be encouraged to move on.
9. **Show them respect.** This is critically important in the way you speak to them, the tone of your voice, your choice of words, and your body language. Your respect for them cannot be faked. You must sincerely value people to treat them with respect at all times.
10. **Do not take advantage of them.** Employees are not your servants and should not be expected to perform personal services for you. If you delegate tasks, make sure there is value in it for them, either in enhanced compensation or a genuine learning opportunity.
11. **Thank them often.** How easy is it to say, "Thank you"? It costs nothing and it reaps great rewards. The only requirement is that it must be sincerely given.
12. **Say goodbye at the end of the day or shift.** A farewell is a common courtesy that you would extend to family and friends, if for no other reason than as an acknowledgement of departure. The members of your work team, who you depend upon for your success, should receive no less of a courtesy. Again, the need for sincerity is absolute.



## II – SHARE YOUR VISION

*“Help people feel that they are part of something bigger than themselves and their individual job. Do this by making sure they know and have access to the organization's overall mission, vision, and strategic plans.”*

*Susan M. Heathfield*

### Guidance to Leaders

Hospitality organizations need to ensure that leaders share their vision through statements in Organizational Values and Culture. Additional guidance can be found in the concept of Service-based Leadership as discussed in *Leadership on the Line*.

*“Our vision and goals are articulated.”*

*Operating Standards*

*“Explain the ‘big picture’ to your employees. They need to understand how their efforts contribute to the larger goals of the company.”*

*Leadership on the Line, p. 49*

*“Every day you talk to one or more of your employees. Use these conversations to paint the vision, explain the big picture, and connect the small daily task to the larger goal.”*

*Leadership on the Line, p. 55*

*“As a leader you must have a vision of what you are trying to achieve with your operation. If you have no vision of what you want your operation to be, how it is to function, or what quality of work your employees will produce, you are merely maintaining the status quo and are providing little value to your company.*

*“Vision is useless if not shared. Talk about it day in and day out. Vision should be so ingrained in the work lives of your employees that it is constantly on their minds. When it is, all of their abilities and efforts are directed by and toward it.”*

*Leadership on the Line, p. 63*

*“Moving large and complex organizations in a particular direction requires the ability to formulate and articulate a vision of what the organization should be. ‘Selling’ the vision requires constant hammering home of easy-to-grasp themes. Without the ‘big picture’ sense of direction, employees become lost in the day-to-day detail and monotony of their jobs. Leaders must engage with employees on all levels and view such interaction as an opportunity to ‘spread the gospel.’”*

*Leadership on the Line, p. 117*

### What is Vision and How Do You Create It?

According to the Business Dictionary, vision is an *“aspirational description of what an organization would like to achieve or accomplish in the mid-term or long-term future. It is intended to serve as a clear guide for choosing current and future courses of action.”*





A good example of a vision statement is that of Southwest Airlines. Herb Kellerher, the company's CEO, spells out how he envisions his company with the simple statement – “We are THE low-fare airline” – which is meant to guide every decision the company makes at every level. The clear focus is on holding down costs to be the low-fare airline.

Simply put, a vision statement is a description of how you envision your organization, department, or section to perform and the quality of your products and service.

You can create the vision for your team by thinking clearly about what you are trying to accomplish. Some things that come readily to mind in our business are high levels and standards of personalized service, value, quality, friendliness, courtesy, and exceeding member expectations.

### **How Best to Share Your Vision**

As mentioned in *Leadership on the Line*, vision is useless if not shared. There are several things you should do to share your vision:

1. **Write it down.** Take some time to clearly think through your vision. What is it exactly that you want your team to do and how do you want them to do it. Don't expect to write a great vision statement in a few minutes. You may need to write it out, let it sit for awhile, and then come back to it again later. In some cases, writing an effective vision statement will take several iterations until you've captured the essence of what it is you are trying to do. Share it with other managers for their input and feedback. Often a fresh set of eyes will see something obvious that you've missed because you're so close to it.
2. **Format it for its end use.** Think how you intend to use your vision statement. How will you present it to your team and what format(s) would work best? There are a number ways to do this – pocket cards, posters prominently displayed in work areas, envelope stuffers with paychecks, discussions at team meetings, or any creative way you can think of to get your employees to focus on, discuss, and understand exactly what it is your group is trying to accomplish.
3. **Put it in place.** Once you've got it written and formatted in all the ways you intend to use it, put it out there. Post your posters, hold your discussion groups, stuff employees' pay envelopes. This is not a one-time task. Your staff must know that this is not some fad or initiative *du jour* that will go away because you'll lose interest. Your vision is critically important to the development and success of your team. You will need patience and persistence – the will to make it happen – to make it a part of your team's culture. As new employees come into your team, they too must understand the vision. Hopefully, if your work team has bought in to the vision, their words and example will be the most effective means of indoctrinating new team members.
4. **Refer to it.** Talk about it constantly, continually, all the time, without fail – until your employees can recite it in their sleep. What is seen as important to you will be important to your employees. Never miss an opportunity to reinforce your vision.
5. **Connect to it.** Make sure your employees know how their daily tasks contribute to the larger vision. It's too easy for employees to get lost in the day-to-day routine of their jobs. When they do this, they lose focus. When they lose focus, they will not be contributing to the accomplishment of the vision.
6. **Modify it as necessary.** No organization is static. Everything changes over time. Periodically review your vision to ensure it is still valid. Modify or tweak it as necessary to keep it current and relevant.

*About the Author*

Ed Rehkopf is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy and received a Master of Professional Studies degree in Hospitality Management from Cornell's School of Hotel Administration. During his long and varied career, he has managed two historic, university-owned hotels, managed at a four-star desert resort, directed operations for a regional luxury-budget hotel chain, opened two golf and country clubs, worked in golf course development, and launched a portal web site for the club industry.